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ABSTRACT

This chapter is part of a book that recounts the year's work at the Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC) at Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi. Rather than an "elitist" laboratory school for the children of university faculty, the dual-language ECDC is a collaboration between the Corpus Christi Independent School District and the university, with an enrollment representative of Corpus Christi's population. The chapter briefly discusses multicultural children's literature and provides criteria for selecting high-quality multicultural children's literature. The chapter also discusses ECDC's commitment to selecting and using high-quality multicultural literature, particularly Latino and Spanish-language literature, in the classroom environment. (Contains 25 references and lists 5 children's books.) (EV)

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Chapter 9

Multicultural Literature: Broadening Young Children's Experiences

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PS 030600

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The 21st century brings a new and diverse group of learners into the public schools. By 2020, 50% of the students in our schools will be minorities (Webb, Metha, Jordan, 2000) and 85% of our nation's teachers will be white females, who differ from their students racially, culturally, and in social status (Banks, 1991a). Because schools are becoming much more culturally and linguistically diverse, educators need to learn more about the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all students. They should strive to provide experiences in the classroom that closely mirror the cultural and linguistic environments of their students. Teale and Yokota (2000) contend that "children need to see themselves and others in our diverse society reflected in the selections read by the teacher" (p. 15). One method of providing diversity for both students and teachers is through literature, specifically a quality multicultural literature program.

Literature functions to "reaffirm the values, principles, and assumptions that structure and give meaning to a specific vision of the world" (Taxel, 1993, p. 10). A good piece of literature, in general, can alter and enhance one's view of the world, (Bieger, 1996) and multicultural literature, in particular, can offer rich and complex opportunities for reflection about diverse cultures (Fisher & Serns, 1998). As readers of multicultural literature, young children can become emotionally engaged through the development of character and plot and expand their contexts for understanding people and situations beyond their own lives (Laframboise & Griffith 1997; Tiedt, 1992).

In this chapter, we briefly discuss multicultural children's literature and criteria for selecting quality multicultural children's literature. We will also present an example of one school's commitment to selecting and using quality multicultural literature in the classroom environment.

What is Multicultural Literature?

There are various definitions for multicultural literature. Broadly defined, multicultural literature includes literature about people who are considered outside of the mainstream of society and have been in some manner marginalized. This definition would include people from diverse cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. In addition, it encompasses issues on gender, sexual orientation and disabilities (Yokoto, 2001). A more narrow definition of multicultural

literature focuses on people of color from diverse cultural, linguistic, and religious groups (Yokoto, 2001). For the purpose of this article, the latter definition of multicultural literature will be used.

While using multicultural literature in the classroom is an excellent method to introduce students to the diversity that surrounds them, it is necessary to select quality multicultural literature. There are several criteria to consider in selecting high quality multicultural children's literature.

Criteria for Selecting Multicultural Literature

In recent years there has been an increase in children's books written about culturally and linguistically diverse groups. This influx of new multicultural children's books has made finding culturally diverse books to use in the classroom much easier. However, not all of the multicultural children's books are of high caliber and caution should be used in selecting books for the classroom. Reddish (2000) recommends selecting books that are well written, high in "literary quality: plot, character development, setting, theme, and style" (p. 3). Furthermore, there is always the danger that books may contain literary characters or situations that perpetuate negative stereotypical images of culturally and linguistically diverse populations. It is necessary to select quality multicultural children's literature that provides accurate and authentic portrayals of cultural groups. In order to select high quality multicultural children's literature, the following criteria can be used to guide the selection process:

1. Characters should be *authentic*, not stereotyped.
2. Characters should be *balanced*—with regard to physical, social, and emotional attributes.
3. The setting should be *consistent* with either a historical or contemporary time frame.
4. The themes and values should be *consistent* with the specific culture depicted.
5. The illustrations, gender roles, and information about the culture should be *accurate*.
6. The selection should be *rich* in cultural details.
7. The selection should include an authentic *interaction* between characters with a cultural group or between two or more cultural groups.

8. There should be a *purpose* for including members of a "minority" group, not just to fill a quota of sorts.
9. The selection should *invite* reflection, critical analysis, and response.
10. The selection should *meet the generally accepted criteria of quality* for the particular genre in which it is written (Yokota, 1993).

Further criteria lie in Banks' (1991a) model for integrating multicultural content into the curriculum. His model identifies four levels of integration, including the Contributions Approach, the Additive Approach, the Transformational Approach, and the Social Action Approach.

At the lowest level of the model, the Contributions Approach, educators focus on the highlights, heroes, and holidays of a particular culture. For example, a teacher might read a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. in January or Singer's (1980) *The Power of Light. Eight stories for Hanukkah* in December to note the contributions and traditions of African American and Jewish American cultures. In this approach, the traditional ethnocentric curriculum remains unchanged in its basic structure. This purely cosmetic approach provides teachers with a quick, non-threatening way to integrate the curriculum. It often reinforces stereotypes about minority groups while using safe, non threatening heroes found acceptable to the mainstream.

At the next level, the Additive Approach, content, concepts, and themes that reflect other cultures are added to the curriculum without thoroughly integrating and connecting the cultural concept throughout the curriculum. For example, a book such as Politi' (1976) *Three Stalks of Corn* may be the Hispanic addition to a elementary level unit about food or folktales. If students are given just a single exposure to such a book without spending valuable time discussing the substantive and/or controversial multicultural concepts they are not cognitively or affectively prepared to understand what is being taught.

The third level is the Transformational Approach in which the structure of the curriculum is changed to provide students with the opportunity to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of different cultural groups. Using this approach children might read and compare *The Matchlock Gun* (Edmond 1941) to Hickman's (1979) *The Valley of the Shadow*. The first boo

contains stereotypical visions of unprovoked savagery and attacks on Anglo settlers whereas the second book portrays the true account of the massacre of peaceful Indians at the hands of whites. Thus, the goal of the transformational approach is to help students develop a critical awareness of, understanding of, and respect for multicultural concepts, events, and people.

The highest level of Bank's hierarchy is the Social Action Approach. Here, students identify social problems and concerns, make decisions, and take actions to help resolve the problems they have identified. Students begin to feel empowered to participate in social change because they have the knowledge and perspective to do so. After reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), students might sponsor a "Freedom Day" to celebrate how far the nation has come and to accentuate how much remains to be done in terms of true freedom and equality for all citizens.

When multicultural literature becomes an integral part of the curriculum and teachers act as models and guides, classrooms can become areas for open exchange. Literature that is presented with a multicultural focus and the discussions that follow permit students to read, think, and become engaged with the text. As cultural development is a component of bilingual education programs, multicultural literature is an avenue to accomplish the goal of cultural development.

Teachers must first help students examine and identify with their own cultural backgrounds (Banks, 1991b). Some students are knowledgeable about their ethnic or cultural heritage, whereas others may identify so strongly with the mainstream culture that they neglect learning or discovering more about their own culture and often find themselves feeling as if they do not belong to either the mainstream or their own cultural group (Dietrich & Ralph, 1995).

An Example of Effectively Promoting Multicultural Literature in School

The Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC) was established on the Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC) campus as a pre-kindergarten three-year-old to third grade dual

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language school and as part of the Corpus Christi Independent School District in the 1995-96 school year. As a dual language school, the school adopted the 50/50 model of language delivery in the dual language program. Spanish and English are the languages of instruction in the school. The focus of the school is designed to address the economic, language, and cultural barriers that stand in the way of a solid education for many students. Each classroom has made a concerted effort to incorporate multicultural literature into the instructional day. Teachers at the ECDC are aware that in order to promote bilingual and multicultural education, students should be able to explore their own cultures and understand the contributions of other cultures.

Children's literature selections allow students to enjoy and replicate actual and vicarious life experiences of others right in the classroom. Storybooks act as "mirrors and windows on a global community" (Cox & Galdo, 1990, p. 582). Faltis (1989) summarizes the advantages of using storybooks for language minority students. First, storybooks are an excellent source for both vocabulary and concept development because the words tend to be presented in contexts supported with pictures and other types of extralinguistic clues. Second, storybooks provide a context for verbal interaction, particularly the important sequence of elicitation-response-evaluation. Third, storybooks teach children about attitudes and behaviors that are valued in society. Integrating what is taught around a literary selection of the week is beneficial for all children and particularly for non-English speaking children. This approach provides them with a common bond even if it is not in the child's home language. The book becomes a stimulus for academic and social interaction as well as a comprehensive connection for the week's learning experiences. The learning objectives of the curriculum are embedded in comprehensive input and the very real drama of the literary selection (Coonrod & Hughes, 1994).

At the ECDC, the faculty and administration, working collaboratively, have strived to provide multicultural literature in the individual classrooms and in the school library. In order for children to identify with the world around them, and to appreciate and value the differences and similarities of other people to themselves, it is important for them first to discover their own identities. When children enjoy books because they relate to characters, identify with situations, and understand personalities or behavior, they come to the

realization that there are others like themselves. Books can also help children solve problems by reading and seeing how situations and circumstances are handled by others. Books can also inspire children to pursue goals because someone like them did the same thing. Children must be able to find books that focus on their ethnic identities and backgrounds to develop the sense of self so important to growing up and to the appreciation of others and the world around them (Goldenberg, 1994).

Following the *Guidelines for Multilingual Materials Collection and Development and Library Services* (American Library Association, 1990), the ECDC has attempted to provide an effective, balanced, and substantial collection for each ethnic, cultural, or linguistic group in the school community. Because the school is a dual language school, the administration, with the guidance and support of the bilingual faculty, has worked to ensure that the collection represents materials that relate to the size of the group in the community. Student classroom and library books in Spanish are provided at the same level as the English materials. As recommended in the guidelines, materials are provided in the library in a variety of formats, including print, audio-visual, and computer software. A congressional appropriation grant facilitated an increase in the collections. Multilingual collections represent a cross-section of subjects, literary genres, and time periods. The library and classroom collections, representing authors from each particular national and linguistic group, contain works published both in the country of origin and in this country. Children's classics in both English and Spanish have also been added to the library collection. Reference materials in both languages are also available for student use.

Because Spanish is one of the languages of instruction, a major goal has been the addition of Latino literature to classroom and library collections. Latino and Hispanic literature can present strong images that can make Hispanic and Latin-American audiences feel admired and respected, while teaching non-Hispanic and non-Latin American audiences to appreciate these communities. Most importantly, these positive images can serve to remind all students of the universality of human life (Vandergrift & Agosto, 1995).

In selecting materials for the ECDC, the administration and faculty also tried to keep in mind the advice of Hispanic author, Gary Soto (2000) who stated:

1. Select books that show Hispanic women in contemporary roles.
2. Share biographies of Latinos so students understand Latinos' contributions to the U.S. and to the world.
3. Use picture books and novels as a way to inspire students to learn more about the history and culture of the Latino group depicted in the story.
4. Look for stories that use Spanish words and phrases- they provide realism and show respect for the culture.
5. Learn to pronounce the Spanish words correctly; many books include pronunciation guides to help you.

The focus on multicultural literature was also present in th selection of instructional materials. The *Cancionero* (2000) serie published by Hampton Brown contains many stories related to Latin culture. The series is used in Grades 1, 2, and 3 for supplement instruction. The *Pan y Canela* (2000) series of tradebooks is also use as support for the classroom libraries. In addition, in the kinder an pre-kinder classrooms, *Rimas y Risas* (2000) is used for Spanis instruction and *Dias y Dias de Poesia* (2000) is used for enrichmer and instruction. Trade books written in Spanish and used fc additional content reading materials have also been incorporated int classroom instruction.

All attempts to incorporate multicultural and linguisticall different literature have been pursued by the administration, facult and university consultant faculty. With a dual language program i place, there must be multicultural materials available not only to hel students develop languages to their full potential, but also to develc students who are proud of their own cultural heritage and are able t respect other cultures in the school and community.

Conclusion

Freire and Macedo (1987) assert that students need " first to lea to read their world and then to read the word." In a world that becoming so culturally and linguistically diverse, how does one crea such learning experiences without exposure to racial and ethn minority reading materials and a teacher who can sensitively guic students in their discussion? This is an agenda important for a educators to consider.

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